

UTILITARIAN THEORIES OF JUSTICE

I. Utilitarianism

- A. *The (Misleading) Slogan:* Sometimes people define ‘utilitarianism’ by using the slogan, “The greatest good for the greatest number”. However, this sets up two criteria (maximizing good, and maximizing the number of people who receive it) and there is no guarantee that an action which does one will do the other. This is *not* our definition of ‘utilitarianism’.
- B. *The Definition:* Utilitarianism is a theory which holds that an action is morally right if, and only if, it produces at least as much utility as any alternative action when the utility of all is counted equally.
 - 1. Utilitarians differ on the account of utility—that is to say, on what has intrinsic value. What is essential to a theory’s being a utilitarian theory is that it holds that all goodness is, at bottom, goodness for an individual. Overall goodness is just a function (usually just the sum) of individual goodness. The following are examples of some of the most influential theories of value adopted by utilitarians.
 - a. Hedonism
 - b. Eudaimonism
 - c. Desire Satisfaction Theory
- C. *The plausibility of utilitarianism:* Assuming we can give an adequate theory of moral goodness, the intuition that moral rightness consists in maximizing moral goodness seems very plausible. Furthermore, the assumption that overall moral goodness is just the sum of individual goodness, seems initially plausible as well.

II. Utilitarian Moral Theory and the Standard of Distributive Justice

- A. Two standards of distributive justice that a utilitarian may adopt.
 - 1. *Utilitarian standard of justice:* The utilitarian may argue that a distribution is just if, and only if, it produces more total good than any alternative distribution available.
 - 2. *Nonutilitarian standard of justice:* The utilitarian may also use a standard of *justice* that is not utilitarian in character, determining justice in some other way—perhaps by considerations of equality, merit, or desert. The utilitarian will then go on to argue that justice is to be morally pursued only to the extent that doing so will maximize utility. (This is what J.J.C. Smart does in his essay.)
- B. We can avoid misunderstanding by simply asking how goods should be distributed according to the utilitarian. A utilitarian of the first sort will say that they should always be distributed justly (*i.e.*, so as to maximize utility); a utilitarian of the second sort will say that they should be distributed justly when and only when this maximizes utility, and, when it doesn’t, they should be distributed in whatever unjust way maximizes utility. Both theorists agree that goods should always be distributed so as to maximize utility.

III. Utilitarian Considerations Concerning the Distribution of Wealth

- A. This issue, as will all practical moral issues for the utilitarian, turns on empirical considerations. In this case, it turns on highly controversial, and sometimes quite technical, empirical issues. Still, the following considerations will be relevant.
1. “*More is Better (usually)*”: Wealth will typically be *extrinsically* valuable because of its ability to produce whatever the particular utilitarian takes to be intrinsically valuable. (Maybe you can’t buy love, but you can probably buy pleasure. Maybe you can’t buy happiness, but you can buy some of the things that lead to happiness. And maybe money can’t satisfy all of your desires, but it can help you satisfy some.) This means that there will be a utilitarian argument increasing individual’s wealth.
 2. “*The More You Have, the Less You Get From More (usually)*”: Typically, an increase of *n* dollars to a wealthy person will increase her utility less than an equal increase to a poor person. Because of this *diminishing marginal utility* of wealth, there will be a standing (though not necessarily conclusive) argument in favor of more equal distributions of wealth.
 3. “*Encourage Good-Doing*”: There are sometimes “*efficiencies of inequalities*”. That is to say, sometimes (despite the diminishing marginal utility of wealth, you can maximize utility by distributing it unevenly. For example, to encourage talented people to do difficult, dangerous or distasteful jobs, or to encourage productivity, you might want to pay more to some than to others. This can promote the general utility by producing a “larger pie” (of utility).
 4. “*Don’t Piss People Off*”: Because people are prone to feelings of envy and resentment and these feelings are themselves bad and can provoke bad actions, it is better, *other things being equal*, that the distribution of wealth not cause envy and resentment.
- B. Because of the difficulties of settling the empirical questions on which the justification of a distribution of wealth hinges, it is difficult to determine what practical implications the theory has for the distribution of wealth. Given this, it is difficult to assess utilitarianism in terms of its practical implications for the distribution of wealth.

IV. Objections to Utilitarian Theories of the Distribution of Wealth.

A. Fairness

1. Rawls (for example) criticizes utilitarianism on the grounds that it “fails to take seriously the distinction between persons”. That is, it lumps all benefits and disbenefits to all persons together, and evaluates distributions in terms of this overall balance of benefits to disbenefits without regard to the question of *how* the benefits and disbenefits are distributed.

B. Rights

1. Nozick (for example) criticizes utilitarianism on the grounds that it allows violations of individuals rights. Wealth does not (typically) rain down on us like “*mana from heaven*”. It comes into the world already owned by someone. To “redistribute” it in order to maximize overall utility is to violate the rights of those who own the wealth.